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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 003225

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/SINGH
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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MASS](#) [LE](#) [SY](#) [IS](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: DEFENSE MINISTER POSITIVE ON UNIFIL,
PESSIMISTIC ON POLITICS

SUMMARY

¶1. (S) Defense Minister Murr is positive on the deployment of and cooperation between the LAF and UNIFIL. On the political scene, Murr is pessimistic about potential future Hizballah and FPM demonstrations. Deeply worried about Shia-Sunni tensions that he fears Internal Security Forces could inadvertently exacerbate, Murr intends to use the LAF, if necessary, to control any demonstrations that pose a threat. End Summary.

LAF/UNIFIL COOPERATION IN SOUTH

¶2. (S) Ambassador and poloff met October 4 with Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Elias Murr. Responding to the Ambassador's questions about possible collusion between the LAF and Hizballah, Murr gave an upbeat assessment on deployment of LAF and UNIFIL troops in the South. He stated that he was receiving reports twice a day from UNIFIL and the reports had not indicated any problem. He admitted, however, that he had just begun receiving the reports this week. He felt cooperation between LAF and UNIFIL was going well; presently 16,000 LAF troops are deployed in the south. In cooperation with UNIFIL deployments, over 80 LAF check points have been established in the south. Ambassador inquired whether the LAF deployments had discovered any illicit arms caches. Murr replied that "no arms had been found" in the areas the LAF had just taken over, but he chalked this up to the fact that the LAF had only been in those areas for a day or two. In terms of the other parts of the south, Murr said, without elaboration, that weapons had indeed been found and confiscated.

RESOLUTION OF UNIFIL LAND ISSUE

¶3. (S) The Ambassador inquired about the UNIFIL French contingent's problem of private landowners not leasing property to billet its troops due to non-payment by the GOL. Murr stated that payment of \$800K had been made to the landowners for past use of their land and an additional \$1.5 million credit had been set aside to cover UNIFIL's land needs over the next five years. He stated any continuing problem in this area will be a result of slow payment processing by the Finance Ministry. The Ambassador said he would address this issue with Finance Minister Jihad Azour in their next meeting. Finally, Murr added that there was "no truth" to the rumors that Hizballah was pressuring private

landowners not to lease land to UNIFIL.

NO TRUTH TO ARMS SMUGGLING TUNNELS

¶4. (S) Murr quickly dismissed rumors of tunnels running underneath the Syrian/Lebanon borders for smuggling arms for Hizballah and other Syrian agents. He said it was "quiet on the border" and the tunnel rumors were "false." He claimed smuggling in the Akkar area would, because of the geography, require the building of tunnels 18KM to 24 KM in length, which would be "unfeasible" in his opinion.

TOUGH POLITICAL TIMES AHEAD AFTER RAMADAN

¶5. (S) Murr was much more pessimistic about the political situation in Beirut, although he did not seem overly concerned about either a potential demonstration by Hizballah or the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) rally by set for October ¶15. He allowed that both groups had the same aim: producing political gridlock, either by toppling Siniora's government or blocking its ability to act. Neither Hizballah or FPM really want a national unity government that would work. The use of demonstrations to whip up support is the "only real way" Hizballah and FPM could promote their cause. In doing so, they give the public two stark choices: civil war or the formation of a national unity government. The public, naturally, finds the second option more reasonable.

LAF TO STOP VIOLENT DEMONSTRATIONS

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¶6. (S) Murr stated that he was prepared to use the LAF to confront violent demonstrations in the streets. He would rather have the LAF enforce control over demonstration than wait for the ISF to react. His concern is based on the perception of the ISF as a Sunni-dominated force. Murr cited the Sunni extremist riots of February 5, when the ISF did not use the required force to stop the destruction of Christian property, and noted that there has been doubt regarding the political balance of the ISF. He noted that, in the past, the ISF's Sunni command was often balanced by the fact that the Minister of Interior, who supervises the ISF Commander, was usually Christian. Now, both the Minister and the ISF Commander are Sunni, as is the head of the ISF's powerful intelligence bureau. So the whole ISF, despite talented officers of other confessions, has acquired a Sunni flavor.

COMMENT

¶7. (S) We don't know what accounts for Murr's rosy assessment of the UNIFIL-LAF cooperation and roles in the south: is he being misled, does he want to mislead/reassure us, or is he truly satisfied? Certainly, the situation is better than it was in June, when UNIFIL was smaller and no LAF soldiers were present for miles. But Hizballah, while now somewhat hemmed in, nevertheless seems by most reports to have maintained more freedom of movement than UNSCR 1701 intends.

¶8. (S) As for Murr's comments regarding Sunni-Shia tensions, we agree fully that Hizballah and Michel Aoun are succeeding in portraying the ISF as a Sunni militia. This is an unfair charge, but it is one that has been broadly accepted as fact by many followers of Aoun and Hizballah. As the LAF still enjoys a solid reputation as a national institution representing all communities, use of the LAF in the case of Shia-Sunni clashes would be less provocative than use of the ISF. The question is whether the LAF has the capacity to maintain its current deployments in the south and along the Syrian borders while also responding to internal disputes.

